

ERUPTION IN EAST EUROPE

A Myth Destroyed and a Revolution Betrayed

HUGH SETON-WATSON

THE "thaw" in Poland goes back at least to the fall of Beria in June of 1953. One consequence of this event was the defection to the West of a high official of the Polish security police named Josef Swiatlo. This man's revelations on the misdeeds of his service, and on the scandals and intrigues in the highest political circles in Poland, which were widely used by Western broadcasting services and in the Free Europe Committee's balloon-borne leaflets and pamphlets, undoubtedly helped the demoralization of the Polish leadership and stimulated opposition from within the party. The security police were generally downgraded, as in the Soviet Union. At the end of 1954 Radkiewicz, for ten years boss of the police, was transferred to the Ministry of State Farms. During 1955 pressure was gradually relaxed. In particular, there was considerably more cultural contact with the West, and it was noticed that delegates from Poland to international meetings spoke with surprising freedom.*

A new phase started with the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist party in February 1956. The First Secretary of the Polish Communist party,† Boleslaw Bierut, died

in Moscow shortly after the Congress, at which he had led his party's delegation. It will be remembered that the Czech Communist leader, Klement Gottwald, died immediately after returning from Stalin's funeral in March 1953, and that the Bulgarian Communist leader, Georgi Dimitrov, died when undergoing treatment in the Soviet Union in 1949. The deaths of all three occurred at turning points in Soviet policy (the breach with Tito, the death of Stalin, and the campaign against Stalin's memory). Whether the Soviet leaders expedited Bierut's death or not, it is certain that Khrushchev personally intervened in the selection of his successor, Edward Ochab. It appears also that he told the Polish Communists that they must make themselves more popular with their own people. During the following months a remarkable freedom of opinion appeared in the Polish press, especially in economic and literary journals, and in the organ of the youth movement, *Po Prostu*. There was talk of making the Sejm a real parliament, with real debates on real problems. There were bitter attacks on the privileges of the higher bureaucracy, with their special shops for luxury goods. The regime's statements about rising standards of living were exposed as lies. One article, for instance, on the much boasted price reductions, pointed out how a coat that had cost some 300 zloty was removed from the shop windows at the time of the price reduction, then reappeared at 500 zloty, was again removed at a second price reduction and reappeared again, with leather

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*See Norman Birnbaum's article "Science, Ideology, and Dialogue" in this issue.—ED.

†The party's official title is Polish United Workers party (PZPR), but it is in fact a Communist party, and it seems simpler so to refer to it.

instead of plastic buttons, costing 735 *zloty*.

At the end of June came the Poznan rising. This was followed not by repression but by official admissions of failure and by still fiercer denunciation in the press of social injustice and of the economic misery in which the workers lived. Bulganin's remarks about Poznan, and the mention of it in the Soviet Communist party's resolution on the "cult of personality" as being the work of foreign imperialists, found no echo in speeches by First Secretary Ochab and Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz, who attributed the revolt to economic conditions. Economists freely discussed the existence of large-scale concealed unemployment, or denounced the Leninist theory of the division of the peasantry into three classes of "kulaks," "medium," and "small."

The trials of persons arrested after the Poznan rising were conducted with remarkable fairness, the violent methods of the police were exposed and condemned by the judges, and the sentences were lenient. Meanwhile pressure came from within the party for the restoration of Gomulka, the former Communist leader who had been purged in 1949 for nationalism. Already in the spring, the closest collaborator of the late Bierut, Jakub Berman, and the former security boss, Radkiewicz, had been removed from the party's Politburo. In October they were followed by the economic dictator of the postwar years, Hilary Minc. The climax came with the arrival in Warsaw of the strongest team of Soviet leaders that had ever been outside Russia at one time since the Soviet regime was created. It is interesting to note that the group included not only Khrushchev and Mikoyan, who were identified with the pro-Tito course of the last two years, but also Molotov and Kaganovich, the closest friends of Stalin. Whether this means that all were agreed with regard to Poland, or that they had all come in order to keep an eye on each other, is anybody's guess. What is certain is that they were unable to intimidate the Poles.

The Polish Central Committee on October 22 elected Gomulka First Secretary of the

party. The most devoted servants of the Soviet Union in the old Politburo (Mazur, Jozwiak, and Zenon Nowak) were not re-elected, nor was the Soviet Marshal Rokossovsky. But the former First Secretary, Ochab, remained a member of both the Secretariat and the Politburo, and Cyrankiewicz remained Prime Minister. One of Gomulka's first acts was to purge at least half the provincial committee of the party, putting in his own men. He also placed his old comrade, General Spychalski, as Deputy Minister of War, and another Communist who had suffered imprisonment, General Komak, as Head of the Security Corps.

An interesting feature of the Polish Communist party since 1944 is that, at least at the Central Committee level, its leadership has remained rather stable. Only 22 per cent of the persons who were members in 1948 had been removed by 1956. A similar proportion (28 per cent) is found in Bulgaria, but the turnover is much higher in Czechoslovakia (58 per cent) and in Hungary (50 per cent).^{*} It is worth stressing that the Polish Central Committee which in October 1956 voted for Gomulka was essentially the same as that which in December 1948 had condemned him. They were of course well aware of the pressure and discontent both within and outside the party. Nevertheless they deserve credit for their ability to make concessions, and to stand up to Soviet pressure. By doing so, they may have saved the Communist party for a time—which as Westerners we may regret—but they also saved Poland from immediate invasion. Their Hungarian colleagues proved incapable of this elementary wisdom.

THE events in Hungary can also be traced back to 1953. In that year, in July, the autocrat of the Communist party, Matyas Rakosi, while retaining the First Secretaryship of the party, gave up the Premiership to Imre Nagy, who introduced a "new course" in economic policy, and even re-

^{*}The comparisons are: Bulgaria 1954 and 1945, Czechoslovakia 1954 and 1949, Hungary 1954 and 1948.

laxed the political pressure. Nagy was removed in 1955, within a few weeks of the "resignation" of Malenkov as Soviet Premier. He was accused of neglecting the development of heavy industry, and of building up the People's Front into a political rival to the party. The supremacy of Rakosi was reasserted, with a certain Hegedus as his Prime Minister. The party reverted to a "hard" course, including the promise of much more rapid collectivization of agriculture. Economic conditions continued to get even worse. The renewed political pressure did not, however, silence the Hungarian intelligentsia. In the winter of 1955 a number of writers who were members of the Communist party were severely rebuked by the party leadership for their criticisms. The spirit of protest could not be checked, and it was encouraged by the knowledge that Tito, who was now being courted by the Soviet leaders, would never consent to the survival in power of his bitterest enemy.

Rakosi fought hard for his position. The condemnation of the "cult of personality" by the Soviet 20th Congress was a hard blow. But he had the effrontery to admit, not only that his party had been guilty of this sin (he himself being of course the idol), but that Laszlo Rajk, the "nationalist" Communist executed in 1949, had been innocent of the offenses charged against him—and yet to stay in power.

But pressure from the people, and especially from the intellectuals, was growing irresistibly. The writers' and youth organizations were the spearhead, and in both it was at first rebellious Communists who took the lead. Large public discussions were held in literary circles known as the Petöfi Club (in honor of Hungary's revolutionary poet of 1848). These meetings openly clamored for Rakosi's fall. The Poznan example, and further pressure from Tito, also probably helped to convince Moscow that Rakosi had to be scrapped. He was removed from the First Secretaryship on July 18, but his successor was Ernő Gerő, his closest assistant, hardly less dictatorial or less subservient to Moscow than Rakosi himself. During the

summer the literary revolt went on. In September the conference of the Writers' Union elected a new leadership consisting of rebellious Communists and non-Communists. Among them were persons who had only just emerged from years of prison. None of the party watch-dogs was re-elected. A few weeks later the rehabilitated victims of the 1949 purge were publicly reinterred.

The Hungarian revolution was precipitated by events in Poland. A demonstration of students laid a wreath on the statue of General Bem, the Pole who had led Hungarian forces in the revolutionary war of 1849. The crowds began to shout for Imre Nagy, whose two years of "new course" had made him popular even among non-Communists, and who was the obvious candidate for the role of Hungarian Gomulka. But Gerő saw fit at this stage to make a broadcast of Stalinian rigidity. Having met both Khrushchev and Tito in the Crimea, and having made the pilgrimage to Belgrade, he no doubt felt strong enough to ignore the popular mood: perhaps he was simply incapable of recognizing it. Nagy himself, who by now had been re-admitted to the party's Central Committee, made a mild speech to a crowd in the square in front of the Parliament which did not satisfy anyone. The crowd then toppled over the giant statue of Stalin, and approached the radio station. It was at this point, on the evening of October 23, that the security police opened fire. The crowd did not disperse, and it was reinforced by armed workers and soldiers.

In the early morning hours of the 24th, Soviet tanks entered Budapest, and it was announced a little later that the government, under the Warsaw Pact, had asked the Soviet army to help restore order. The Warsaw Pact is, of course, a military alliance between states directed against foreign countries (the NATO powers and a re-armed Germany), not against the peoples of the signatory states. It is still not clear who invited the Russians, or indeed whether there was an invitation at all. Imre Nagy some days later denied that he had done so. It was in the late morning of the 24th that

the radio referred to Nagy as Prime Minister: when and by whom he was appointed, was not stated. During the 24th the Soviet tanks appear to have taken no part in the fighting. On the morning of the 25th a large crowd assembled in the Parliament square. It was at this point that Soviet tanks fired into the unarmed mass of workers and students, killing six hundred persons.

Far too little still is known of the confused pattern of events in the whole country. But it would seem that this massacre by Russians was the decisive moment. Thereafter the army, which had hitherto been mainly neutral, though some soldiers had joined the masses, came over to the revolution. The Hungarian nation rose against the Russians, not only in Budapest but in most other large towns. All western Hungary was soon in their hands, but the position east of the Danube has never been made clear.

IT MIGHT be thought that the Hungarians behaved recklessly, that they were wrong not to follow the example of moderation set by the Poles. But this is a baseless criticism. The decisive difference between events in Hungary and in Poland lies in the different attitudes of the Communist leaderships. Ochab and Cyrankiewicz were wise enough to make way for Gomulka, and Gomulka was strong and clever enough to take and hold power. In Hungary the party was built around the autocracy of Rakosi. In both countries Communism as such was detested by the vast majority of the nation. The Communist parties were small minorities, but while the Polish party was an intelligent minority, the Hungarian was a purely one-man show. Three provocative blunders made an explosion inevitable: Gerö's Stalinist speech of October 23, the invitation to the Russians to intervene, and the massacre in front of the Parliament. After this, what could the Hungarians do but fight or surrender? There was no opening for moderation or maneuver. That they chose to fight is a proof not of recklessness but of courage and national unity.

Dictatorships are as old as the human race, but totalitarianism is a creation of the 20th century made possible by mass means of communication and by the total will to power of secular religions. Totalitarianism, with its all-pervading propaganda, its security police, its invasion of private life and belief, and its systematic atomization of society, has long seemed invincible from within. Only war destroyed Hitler, and Stalin survived even war. But the Hungarians have shown us that a united nation can unseat a totalitarian regime in two days.

The second lesson is that the forces which led the revolution were precisely those on which the regime had counted for support. The intellectual youth were precisely those children of workers and peasants whom for the last eight years the regime had been bringing up, in its indoctrinated schools, colleges, and universities, to be the brains of totalitarianism. It was they who started and led the movement of the nation against the regime. The first mass support of the revolution came from the Budapest working class, in whose name for so many years the Communists have declaimed their stale Leninist rhetoric. Csepel Island, the biggest industrial concentration in Hungary, sent its armed worker guards to join the demonstrators on October 23. As I write, a week after the second Soviet onslaught of November 4, fighting is still going on in two main centers. One is Csepel Island. The other is Dunapentele, until recently known as Sztalinvaros (Stalin City), the new industrial town built round the new steel mill on the Danube near Mohács, where four hundred and thirty years ago Hungary's armies were destroyed by the Turks, invaders humane and honorable when judged by the standards of Khrushchev and Zhukov. The working class, then, provided the core of the nation's resistance. The third factor of course is the Hungarian army. The old army was destroyed in 1944-45; part of it went into exile in Austria and Germany, and what remained in Hungary was purged and disbanded. The new army has been rebuilt since 1947. It is ironical that Moscow,

in its desire to train cannon fodder to fight the West, should have allowed Hungary—like Rumania and Bulgaria—to exceed the limits laid down in the peace treaties. Even so, the army was not large or very well equipped. Great care was however lavished by Rakosi's regime on the indoctrination, in Marxist-Leninist fanaticism, of the new army, and especially of its officers. But when the crisis came, the army went with the nation against the regime.

Intellectual youth, workers, and army joined in the Hungarian revolution. The rest of the nation—the peasants and what was left of the old bourgeoisie—were of course behind them. Only the security police were against, and they were quickly overcome. The nation fought the Russian army, and forced it to withdraw. By the middle of the week the revolution had won its first battle, and the adversaries stood facing each other. In Moscow there was irresolution. The Soviet leaders, never united since Stalin died, must have been more uncertain, more fearful of each other and of the world, than they had ever been.

IT WAS at this moment that Israel saw fit to invade Egypt, and that Eden and Mollet saw fit to do likewise.

For Israel's plight I have nothing but sympathy. It has long been clear that Nasser was building his strength up to destroy her. It has also long been clear that Nasser is an implacable enemy of the West, concerned not to obtain satisfaction of legitimate Egyptian claims, but to destroy all European and American interests throughout Africa and Western Asia, to create his own Egyptian empire from the Shatt-el-Arab to the Maghreb, selling himself to Moscow or anyone else for the purpose. All this has long been clear to everyone except the government of the United States. That Israel should resort to desperate action to save herself is humanly understandable. Even so, the moment was terribly chosen. Now for the first time since 1947 a chance appeared of getting the Russians out of Europe, of restoring European peace, and the inde-

pendence of European nations captive since the 1930's. A change of this immensity would have transformed the whole Middle East as well, would have deflated Nasser and strengthened Israel. It was hardly to be expected of the leaders of Israel, facing a mortal threat, that they should take so wide a view. But of the leaders of Britain and France this must be expected. It was for them to see the meaning of the Hungarian revolution, to advise Israel accordingly, and to bring this to the notice of the government of the United States.

This is precisely what Sir Anthony Eden and M. Mollet did not do. This is the failure for which history will never forgive them. They turned their backs on Europe in Europe's great moment of hope. Then was the chance for Britain to take the initiative, together with the United States, France, and Germany, to approach the Soviet leaders with firmness, tact, and imagination, to begin new negotiations on European security, on the twin problems of German unity and East European independence, to make it clear that the West was willing to offer a price for Soviet concessions, that it was in Moscow's interest to examine this price rather than to destroy Hungary. This was the only way to European peace, which we have not known since 1933 or perhaps since 1914. This was the first moment since 1947 when there was a chance to begin a political action that had a real chance of securing it.

But Sir Anthony's mind was elsewhere. No doubt he would be hurt by the suggestion that he does not care about Europe. But it is true. He believes sincerely in Anglo-French friendship (what civilized Briton does not?) but he conceives it in narrow diplomatic terms, with vague visions of Clémenceau and Cambon and Edward VII. Of the Europe that begins beyond the Rhine he appears to have no notion. Certainly his complaints against Nasser are sound enough. Certainly he has good grounds to be disappointed with the record of the United Nations and of the United States in the Middle East. But even if his

action had secured a just and stable peace in the Middle East, it would not have justified the betrayal of Europe. As things are now going, it looks as if in addition to betraying Europe he will have destroyed all European influence from Casablanca to Basra and from Aleppo to Lake Victoria.

Not only did Sir Anthony turn his back on Europe: he did not even act quickly. If ever there was a war which was too serious to be left to the generals, it was this one. While the airmen conscientiously pounded away at Egyptian airfields, and the invasion forces waited day after day in Cyprus, all those whom Britain and France had insulted or ignored had time to work themselves into a frenzy of hate. The Soviet leaders quickly saw that no one was going to pay any attention to Europe, and they gave the word for the butchery. As I write a whole week later, the butchery is still going on, Hungarian children are still dying as they try to destroy Soviet tanks with gasoline bombs, Hungary's workers are still on strike, and the representatives of the "Socialist Sixth of the World" are using starvation to force them back to work. And all the time nobody is considering help to Hungary. The United Nations are fairly fully occupied in saving the human race from the atomic war which Sir Anthony's genius and Khrushchev's blood-lust almost unleashed. And when the United Nations does find time to talk about Hungary, that splendid moralist Nehru instructs his representative to abstain.*

THE outlook in Europe is now absolutely uncertain. While the United Nations talks, the Soviet armies may move again, against Poland, or Austria, or Yugoslavia. Only the President of the United States can stop this. He has been as sorely tried by his allies as he has tried them by his complacent inactivity. But it is clear that the responsibility and the decision now are Eisenhower's, and his alone.

In Hungary armed resistance and the general strike will probably be broken in the

end by slaughter and starvation. But what will the conquerors do then? The puppet Premier, Janos Kadar, had quite a good record as a "nationalist" Communist who had suffered torture in prison and had been the leader of the "liberalizing" group within the Politburo since the spring. It seems that when Nagy decided to associate himself with the people's demands for a multi-party regime and for neutrality, Kadar deserted to the Russians. But it is at least possible that he was captured or threatened or tricked. Until more is known, it would perhaps be unjust to regard him as a Quisling: he may prove to have been only a Pétain. What seems hardly open to doubt, is that he cannot hope to set up a Hungarian government. The hatred of the whole nation, especially of the working class, denies him any support but a few thousand security police athirst for vengeance. Nor are economic promises likely to help him much. He may promise cheaper bicycles for the workers and higher potato prices for the peasants, but his protectors are killing their children and have robbed them of their country.

In 1945 the Soviet army looted, raped, and murdered in hot blood, but it was avenging—even if on the innocent—the martyrdom of the Russian people at the hands of Hitler and his satellites. In 1945, even in Soviet-occupied Germany there were millions who felt guilt, and who hoped that the much wronged Russians would help their country to build a new social order once the immediate bitterness of war was past. In Hungary and Rumania too this hope was felt by many. Instead they got the regime of lies, robbery, torture, and colonial subjection symbolized by Rakosi, Ulbricht, and Gheorghiu-Dej. After eight years the Hungarians overthrew it. Back came the Russians. This time they did not confine themselves to atrocities in the heat of battle. They hanged and shot their prisoners in cold blood. They have killed workers' children who leaped at their tanks. They have created famine to force workers to stop a strike. They have invited Hungarian officers to a conference and then arrested them, invited

*See G. F. Hudson's article, "The Paradox of Jawaharlal Nehru," elsewhere in this issue.—ED.

soldiers to surrender and then shot them. This time they are not proud conquerors avenging their country, but perjured butchers. Nowhere in Hungary can they hope for anything but hatred and contempt. Russian soldiers are human. Even their morale will be severely strained.

MEANWHILE the rest of East Europe trembles in silent horror. The Czechs and Slovaks made no protest. Last spring there were criticisms of the government at a writers' conference, and in May the university students (always the bravest people in the Czech nation, and seldom supported by the rest) put forward demands not only for the rights of the universities, but for political liberty. But nothing came of this. The Communist leadership is colorless. Since Gottwald died in 1953, there has been no "cult of personality," and there have never been "nationalists" among Czech Communists. Slansky, Beria's man, executed in 1952, was the last person to deserve this epithet. In Slovakia there are "nationalist" Communists, and some of these escaped the death penalty and have been released. But they were, and are, in no position to organize opposition. Meanwhile the workers have enough to eat, and even decent clothes to wear: Czechoslovakia for more than a year has been more prosperous than any other "People's Democracy."

Rumania and Bulgaria, nearer to Russia, are less socially and culturally advanced, and appear to be an object of negotiation between Moscow and Belgrade. The Rumanian Communist party is so weak, and so detested, that there can be no question of a "nationalist" Communist government supported by the people. This does not of course mean that there are not rivalries among its leaders. Rumanian and Bulgarian Communist delegations have visited Yugoslavia with Soviet approval, and in both countries official spokesmen have been very polite about President Tito and the Yugoslav road to socialism. But in the power apparatus there has been no change.

Yugoslavia's attitude is a curious mixture

of doctrinaire complacency and straightforward funk. President Tito's vanity may be flattered by the compliments from Bucharest and Sofia, but he is too good a realist not to see that his country is as dangerously encircled as in 1949. Yet as doctrinaire Marxist-Leninists, the Yugoslav leaders appear convinced that a multi-party system in Hungary is "counter-revolution"; that there is a "correct" line, which only a Communist party can find, and which, in spite of "mistakes" by Rakosi, Gerö, and Co., can and inevitably must be found; and that as both Khrushchev and Kadar have admitted "mistakes" in the past, they must sincerely wish, and genuinely be able, to find the "correct" solution once the fighting has stopped. This at least is how they talk, and is probably how they think. It would be unwise to assume that such schizophrenia is not possible. Whether Yugoslavia will escape destruction is another matter.

And the West? It is still possible to help Hungary, not only with relief to refugees but by massive economic help to the starving nation. If the United States and the West European governments offer such help, unconditionally and on a vast scale, Moscow will have either to agree or to give help herself on the same scale. In either case Western action will have helped Hungary. The West can also give moral help to the Hungarians in their continued and unflinching moral resistance to the Russians. Demonstrations of the unanimity of European opinion, of all classes, all professions, and all political views, are not without their effect on the Russian people. Finally, the West must reopen the whole problem of European security, that is, of the unity of Germany and the independence of Eastern Europe. For this there must be unity of Western Europe and America, a unity transcending the purely military and economic fields. The murder of Hungary was a blow also at Europe. The only way to restore Hungary and to save ourselves from destruction is to create the unity of Europe, which Eisenhower has forgotten, Mollet ignored, and Eden betrayed.